



Survey says: Low opinion of TRPA persists

Amanda Fehd, afehd@tahoedailytribune.com

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If a recent poll is any indication, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has not made much headway in the past two years in convincing critics it has changed its culture, or that it is accountable and transparent in its decision making.

Assemblyman Tim Leslie, R-Tahoe City, released the results of a mail-in survey he sent to 14,412 voters in Placer and El Dorado Counties. A little over 5 percent, or 739 people, responded.

The Republican lawmaker is an outspoken critic of the agency and wrote several editorials last summer on TRPA's proposed Emerald Bay boating restrictions and a Nevada highway guard rail that the agency apparently did not like the color of.

Leslie has also been a proponent of environmental protection here, helping to author the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act and receiving an award from the Sierra Nevada Alliance for his stance.

More than 67 percent of the survey's respondents said the agency has declined or stayed the same since new leadership took over two years ago.

Executive Director John Singlaub and spokeswoman Julie Regan promised more accountability and better customer service when coming on board as a team two years ago.

Since then, Regan said many have left the agency because they are not happy with the culture change.

"We've experienced more than usual turnover in the last two to three years, but we believe that is related to a lot of the cultural changes we are making at the agency," Regan said. "(The turnover) can be disruptive to our effectiveness in customer service."

One of TRPA's mandates in regulating development here is to protect Lake Tahoe's declining water clarity.

While 65 percent of survey respondents said water quality was their top environmental priority, 42 percent said the agency should be "phased out."

Regan said the results are not surprising, and fit with concerns they've heard through public outreach.

"We need to do a better job of showing results for how we are changing for the better," she said.

She believes the agency has streamlined their permit system and improved customer service.

"People are bringing in homemade cookies and flowers because we are getting such positive experiences with

our planners," she said.

The survey is non-scientific. Bic Olson, a statistics teacher at Lake Tahoe Community College, said a survey's accuracy is compromised when you do not use a random sample of the population.

This survey used a voluntary sample because those who received it in the mail chose whether to return it. In that case, those who are emotionally involved are more likely to respond, Olson said.

John Friedrich with the League to Save Lake Tahoe said the lake needs a strong TRPA and voters in last week's election indicated they want the TRPA to stick around.

"The voters on Tuesday sent a clear message that they want to maintain strong environmental protections. They chose the candidate who stood for that, as opposed to the candidate who stood for weakening TRPA," he said.

El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago campaigned on a platform of building bridges with the agency, while challenger Ted Long focused his campaign on the agency's alleged shortcomings. Santiago won with 78 percent of the vote.

The political affiliations of respondents closely matched those of El Dorado County. About 30 percent of respondents were Republican, 30 percent Democrat, and 25 percent declined to state their party affiliations. Leslie's office obtained this data by comparing identifying information with respondent's voter registration information.

- To view the survey, go to: www.assembly.ca.gov/leslie and click on "Issues," then scroll down to "Opinion Editorials." Click on "TRPA Editorials And Report."

Highlights from the survey:

- 67 percent disagree TRPA has improved over the past two years
- 74 percent agreed TRPA has lost sight of its mission
- 85 percent agreed TRPA needs more accountability to the public
- 80 percent said TRPA is more inclined to approve projects for the wealthy
- 64 percent disagreed TRPA uses sound scientific evidence for policy
- 71 disagreed TRPA involves the public in decision making
- 55 percent disagreed that TRPA is responsive to comments from the public

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